

## ELISABET NEY, SCULPTOR.

BY BRIDE NEILL TAYLOR.

ELISABET NEY was born in Westphalia, of a father who was a nephew of Napoleon's great marshal, and a mother descended from a family of Polish exiles who fled from their unhappy country at the time of its fatal revolution, in peril so imminent that, of all their estates and possessions, nothing was saved but what could be carried away in one chest. I do not know the genesis of her magnificent artistic genius, and I do not know that she herself could give any account of it; but whether there ever were any premonitory manifestations of such powers in her forefathers, those who are familiar with the story of the wonderful, impetuous military genius of the great French marshal are not to be surprised at the revelation of bold and original genius, in any line, among persons of that blood. It was certainly entirely in harmony with the independent and fearless spirit of her family that while still a little more than a child she should conceive the daring idea of studying art, the art of sculpture, inspired thereto while listening to her mother reading the romantic story of Sabina von Steinbach, the daughter of the sublime architect of the grand cathedral of Strasbourg, who, in the fourteenth century, composed and eliseled in stone—working side by side with her father—the statues of the five wise and five foolish virgins which adorn the main portal of that exquisite structure. To an American of to-day, the idea of a young girl studying art does not seem in any way startling, but in the Germany of that generation it was inexpressibly shocking. She would have to go away from home! She would have to study among men! She was aspiring to an art which was practiced only by men! Unheard of projects for a woman! Even to speak of her desire must have required unexampled bravery in a young girl. It surely called for a courage truly soldierly to persist in the face of

rebuke, the discouragement, the ridicule, and the loving forebodings of her family and friends. But she did persist until she finally won her way. She was hardly seventeen when she was at last permitted to go to Munich to begin her studies, hedged about with such precautions of parental and friendly care and surveillance as, at that day, in every part of the world, were thought necessary for the protection of a young girl going out from the parental roof.

At Munich, through influence of the artloving bishop of her native town, Münster, she was well received, and after an examination as to her efficiency in drawing and modeling, she was duly given the matriculation certificate as a pupil of the Academy of Fine Arts. The professor of sculpture took her under his personal instruction in modeling, assigning to her a room connected with his, guarding her against any difficulties. To further conciliate the proprieties, the professors agreed to take her under their especial care, and in fact, one of them invariably went every day all the way to the house of a friend where she lived while in Munich, and escorted her through the streets to her place in the lecture room. As usual, the unexpected happened, and so far from throwing the Munich academy into a state of chaos, the mild presence of a young girl had a surprisingly subduing influence upon the hitherto turbulent students.

She spent two years studying at Munich, and then went to Berlin, which at that time claimed to offer superior advantages to students of sculpture, on account of the residence there of the renowned master, Professor Christian Rauch, still justly famed for his beautiful statue of the Queen of Prussia at Charlottenburg, and for the monument of Frederick the Great at Berlin. She was introduced to the great sculptor in his studio. He was a man of few words, but, naturally attracted by the earnestness of the young aspirant, and by the testimonials of her two years' course at the Munich academy, he asked her to model a composition of her own, and after a few days, on the strength of this composition, he recommended her for the distinction of a two years' scholarship in the Berlin academy. The scholarship was awarded her, but when she presented herself before the authorities of the academy for matriculation, the old difficulty arose again. They declared, with as much emphasis as the authorities of the Munich academy had done two years before, that they could not possibly admit a woman to the classes. It was mildly suggested to them that she had attended the Munich academy without fatal results to the institution, but the objectors were obdurate. So once more was enacted the touching

little drama of one very young woman's courage, tact, confidence and perseverance against the prejudice of the stubborn gentlemen who held the reins of government in the great art school where all her hopes rested. In the end she again carried her point, and entered the Berlin academy triumphantly, though the same atmosphere of churlish doubt and foreboding which had at first surrounded her at the Munich academy also surrounded her here. It all brings to mind very forcibly the story of the experiences of our own Lucy Stone in her efforts to acquire a college education, and of those



BUST OF GARIBALDI.

Made at Capri.

other heroic women who first penetrated the classes of medical schools. All that could most deeply wound the womanly soul they had to encounter; and the wonder must ever remain that they could command the determination necessary to sustain them.

The career of our young artist, begun with so much difficulty, reads from this moment like a fairy tale of uninterrupted success and rapidly accumulating honors.

Rauch offered her a studio next to the government studio which he himself occupied, so that she might work under his immediate

supervision, and for the next two years she enjoyed the inestimable advantage of association with the greatest sculptor of the time. At the end of that period, the death of the master severed this interesting relation between the world-renowned old artist of eighty-two and his young pupil of twenty, who was to become in her turn what he had been in his—the portrait artist of all the great men of her day. For the growth of her reputation soon brought her into friendly relations with the finest minds of the period, and the giants of the world of science, letters, art, and politics sat to her. She made portraits of Von Humboldt, Von Liebig, Jacob Grimm, Schopenhauer, Joachim, Garibaldi, Bismarck and many lesser celebrities; and while still a very young woman, she found herself in the enjoyment of a reputation greater than many a meritorious artist has been able to earn in a whole life-time of labor. It must have been a surprising revelation to the directors of the art academies of Munich and Berlin, who but a few years before had so grudgingly admitted her to the lectures, denying all the time the very right of a woman to aspire to the study of art. It is to be feared, however, that they learned no good lesson from her success, for, though a full generation has passed since she forced the doors of the art academies of Munich and Berlin, the name of Elisabet Ney still remains alone as that of the only woman permitted to study in either of those institutions.

The commission to make the portrait of Bismarck was regarded by the young artist's friends at the time as one of the highest honors which she had yet enjoyed. The German statesman was just then (1867) coming to the beginning of his fame, and King Wilhelm, his grateful monarch and most devoted admirer, looking about him for an artist who should fitly portray for future generations the creator of the German empire, selected Elisabet Ney. She executed the royal commission with such success that her portrait remains to this day one of the most acceptable presentations of Bismarck, and the artists who have followed her complain that they could never succeed in getting a proper sitting from him, but were always referred to the Ney bust for a model. Besides the original portrait in the possession of the royal family, the Bismarck family owns a copy, and another has recently been placed in the National Gallery of Berlin.

After honors and successes like these, it will seem to a democratic reader on this side of the world that to be invited by royalty itself to make its portraits was a dimmer glory, but doubtless the fact that such commissions came to her is evidence of the height to

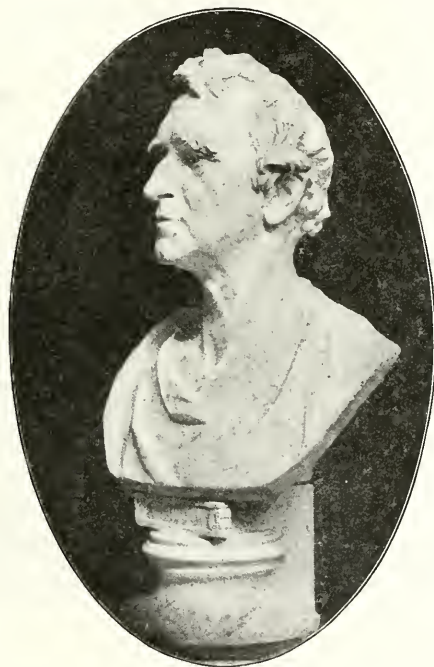


PORTRAIT OF ELISABET NEY BY KAULBACH.



which the young artist's fame had grown. Royalty never contents itself with less than the greatest. King George V of Hanover invited her to the palace to make his bust, and, while she was engaged upon this work, Kaulbach painted a life-sized portrait of her for the National Gallery of Hanover. The picture hangs there now, and shows the young sculptor as she looked in the early days of her fame—a very youthful figure, with a face of classic beauty, standing with one of the tools of her art in her hand beside her bust of King George.

Later, she made a full-length life-sized statue of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, the only sculptured portrait of him ever modeled



JUSTUS VON LIEBIG.

from life. It stands now in the beautiful royal garden of the palace of Linderhoff. It is a work of rare poetic feeling, to which in some mysterious way the artist has contrived to give a tragic prophecy of the doom which even then impended over this unhappily fated monarch.

In the meantime, she and her native Westphalia had not forgotten each other, and at the invitation of the powers there, she adorned its legislative halls with statues of the national heroes and

statesmen. The city of Munich likewise honored her with commissions, in spite of the fact that there had been a time not so long before, when it had tacitly shown its disbelief in the power of feminine genius to fitly express anything, and she executed colossal figures of Mercury and Iris for the decoration of the Polytechnic Institute of that city. The bust of Von Liebig, already mentioned, and one of Wochler, both in colossal size, were also made for the same building.

One of the leading art journals of Germany said about this time that Elisabeth Ney exceeded any portrait artist of her day in her



INTERIOR OF AUSTIN STUDIO.

Miss Ney is working on a bust of William J. Bryan. Others are Ludwig II of Bavaria; Jacob Grimm; the veiled figure of Lady Macbeth; and near this in the background, a bust of Prince Bismarck, the first and only one to which he gave sittings.

wonderful power of penetrating to the profoundest depths of strong natures, and of revealing their characteristics through the medium of her art. Whoever studies any of the busts of the numerous great men she has portrayed must be forcibly struck by the truth of this statement. But, strangely enough—for the two gifts rarely reside in the same genius—her power of revealing the natures of children, and of delicate, poetic women is equally striking. I once saw in

her Austin studio a portrait which very strikingly illustrates the truth of this. It was a bas-relief of a lady in Berlin, who sat for the artist during a visit which the latter made to the German capital the previous year. The portrait was of a woman slightly past middle life, and, with exquisite sympathy, reveals the touching fragility of the invalid, the delicate, not unbeautiful touches of time, the gentle seriousness of a sensitive, poetic nature, educated and sweetened by experience;—truly the portrait of a Gentle Lady. One studies it with an emotion of pensive affection, and with a strong realization of the ideal fineness of all that is truly feminine in nature. The next moment, turning aside, one came up with a shock before a face the very antithesis of all that had aroused his tenderness in the portrait of the lady,—the face of a man, powerful, but ruthless, which seemed to smile with a sardonic hardness and ugliness at the ills of that life which he had pronounced essentially and radically evil—the face of the great pessimistic philosopher, Schopenhauer. Entranced before the artist's luminous revelation of this great sinister nature, one asks with wonder: "Is it possible that the same hand was at one time delicate enough, and at another virile enough, to model the face of the Gentle Lady, and of the hard philosopher?"

In the face of Jacob Grimm both of these powers, so paradoxically united in this artist, were called into play. The student of human nature believes himself enabled to find in this beautiful face, so masculine in contour, so femininely tender in expression, the story of the life of the original, and the nature of his work. It is not surprising that copies of this bust are to be found in many of the German art schools as models for students. Both in subject and treatment it is ideally beautiful.

Another of this artist's most famous busts is the one of Joachim, the violinist. She had a magnificent subject, and she has portrayed him in her most successful manner; the powerful face has the effect of listening internally as if to strains in his own imagination.

An interesting story is told of a portrait of a sister—dead but a few months—of the novelist Georg Ebers, which Elisabet Ney made on her last visit to Berlin. It was done at the request of a friend of Ebers, who wished to present it to him on his birthday. The portrait was executed with the help of photographs, and of such descriptions of the dead girl's nature as friends could give the artist. It was set up in the brother's studio as a surprise when his birthday came, and, touching him deeply by its lifelikeness, drew from him the following beautiful tribute, expressed in a letter to the friend who presented the portrait:



"Absorbed in contemplating this striking likeness, my eyes gathered tears, and I felt that our Paula was again with me. How I would like to kiss the hand of the great, fine-feeling artist, the creative hand that formed this most touching and masterly successful work. Only when unconsciously assisted by a transcendent genius can it be possible so to imbue with truest life the representation of a person one has never seen. This is Paula as I have seen her many a time on serious occasions, when seized by some important thought, or when giving herself up to weighty impressions . . . It was only at intervals that her merry love of life and her keen wit flashed out, but the artist who created the 'Prometheus Bound' has felt that the humor which in more happy days enlivened the noble, clear cut features of this serious woman, could, at this period of her life be only faintly indicated. This she has managed to render apparent by the treatment of the eye and nostril. . . . I am deeply grateful to Elisabet Ney."

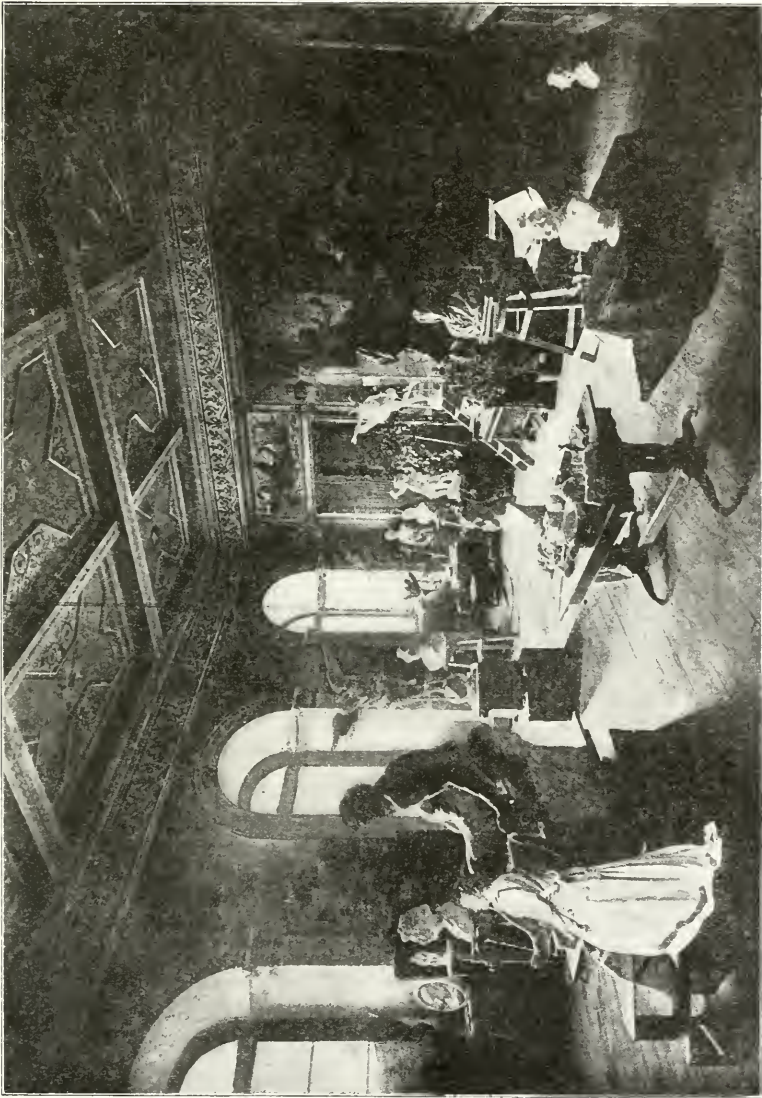
To one unversed in the mysterious processes by which genius works out its conceptions, there is something almost awe-inspiring in this power to produce, with such lifelike fidelity that it shall satisfy even the dead one's best beloved, the features of one whom the artist has never seen.

Her ideal figures and groups show the same largeness and strength of imagination, and the same delicacy and sympathy of treatment as do her portraits.

The "Prometheus Bound," mentioned in Ebers's letter, won high praise from critics, one of whom declared after seeing it that the artist united, as no other artist had ever done, the classic spirit of Greek art with the powerfully individualized spirit of modern art. She has very beautifully expressed the motto of her life, *Sursum*, "upward," in a spirited group of two young children striving forward and upward with a powerfully shown feeling of exaltation and determination in both faces and figures. It is the same idea which animates Longfellow's "Excelsior," but the sculptured expression of the idea has more simplicity and power than the poem. To one familiar with the spirit of those youthful days, when the artist herself was striving forward and upward to the difficult goal of her art, this beautiful group seems the very breath of that young spirit caught and held in marble, before it could fade into nothingness again.

The romantic story of Sabina von Steinbach which first inspired her childish mind, seems to have remained with Elisabet Ney during all the years of struggle and study in Munich and Berlin; for, among

the first of her attempts at original works, made in accordance with her vow, were subjects drawn from the Christian faith, such as "Christ Risen," "The Madonna," "The Martydom of St. Sebastian,"



MISS NEY BY HER STATUE OF PROMETHEUS IN THE STUDIO AT MUNICH.

"St. Sebastian Glorified in Heaven," etc. They show the conservatism of youth, but at the same time the power which from the very first characterized her work, and which doubtless led the sculptor

Rauch to take her under his wing as if he recognized in her his natural successor. This boldness and strength in a feminine genius always strikes the world with amazement each time that it is manifested anew, and has to be discussed and theorized about as if it had never happened before; and yet every really great woman has manifested these two qualities so unfailingly that the world is now getting over its childish amazement at the so-called prodigy. Maria Theresa, Elizabeth of England, George Sand, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mrs. Siddons, Rosa Bonheur, have all been first of all, strong. But the strong quality of Elisabeth Ney's genius created the usual surprise and questioning. One day, while she was modeling the bust of Schopenhauer, the old philosopher sat studying her for a long time with an amused quizzical expression. When the artist had borne it as long as she cared to, she asked: "Why do you look at me so, doctor?"

"I was just trying to see," he answered, "If I could not perhaps discover the beginnings of a little mustache. It grows more impossible to me each day to believe that you can be a woman."

But after all, the feminine in her must have finally impressed him sufficiently, for in his published letters he speaks of her more than once as a most "lovable" *Mädchen*.

But all the great works so far described, all the glory so far won, were made and won in Europe. Thus far her history shows her of and for Europe. What is it that links Elisabeth Ney to Texas? Here comes up the answer to that question which those who know her have so many times heard asked. "How is it possible that such an artist should content herself almost half a lifetime in what—to the esthetically minded—must seem a wilderness?" I hesitate to outline the story which is the explanation of this voluntary exile, because to the ordinary mortal, to whom "Seek ye first the Kingdom of Self" is the only gospel, my explanation will not suffice, and to the extraordinary mortal, who understands these things by a sort of blessed intuition of unselfishness, any explanation is wellnigh superfluous. However, let this much be told:

In addition to her genius for sculpture, Elisabeth Ney had a genius for philanthropy. "Art for humanity's sake" has been the guiding principle of her life, and *Sursum* is but another way of saying it. Some years after the civil war she attempted to give a practical application to this principle of hers. A little band of enthusiasts in Germany conceived the idea of founding a community somewhere in a gentle climate, far removed from the harrassing restrictions of monarchy, where, under the influence of good, beauti-



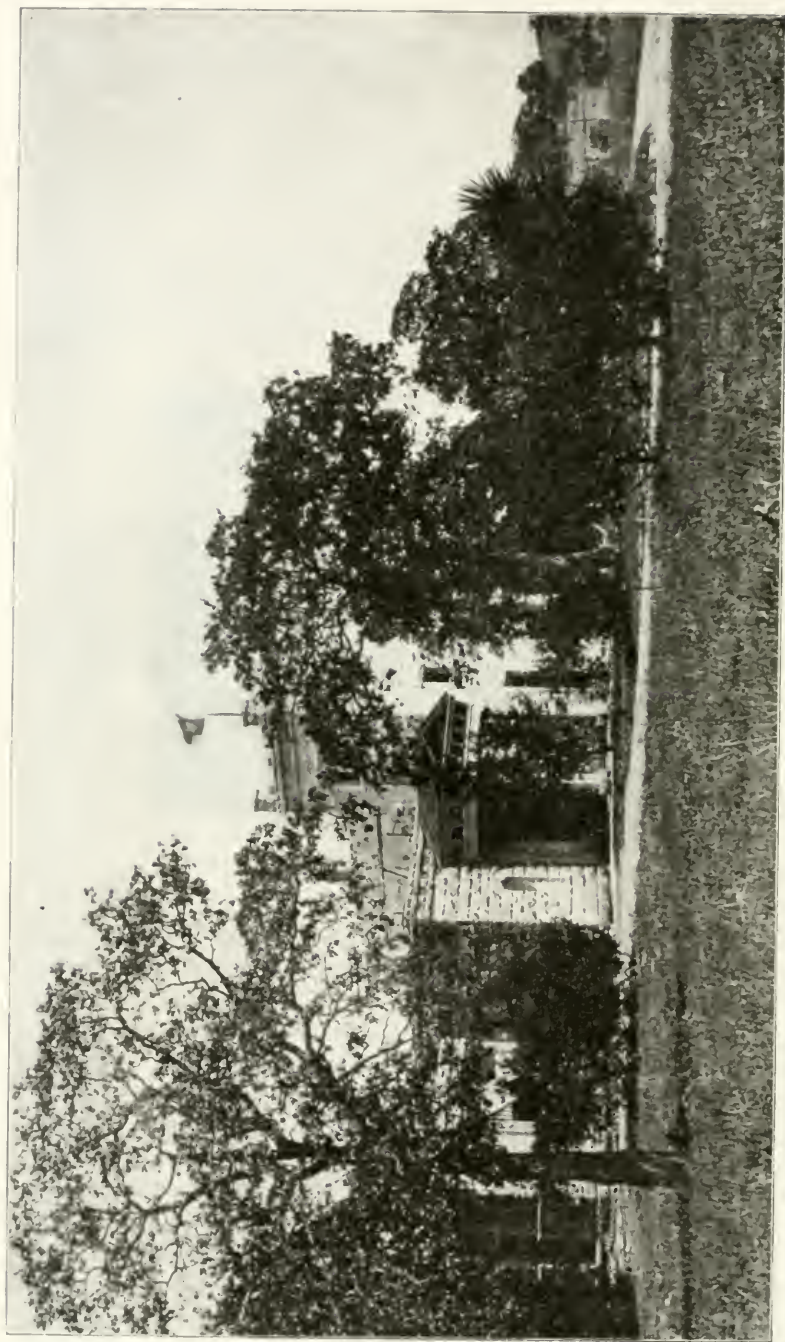
ful, and helpful surroundings, the individual might reach his ultimate development, irrespective of the condition of his material possessions, and unhindered by those social forces which foster poverty, ignorance and vice. It was but another variation of the same dream which so many hopeful minds have entertained during this century. A spot in Georgia was chosen, and work was begun with great energy and confidence. Much money was spent, and much good human enthusiasm likewise, and then—the entrancing dream had its awakening, the experiment ended. Most of the experimenters returned to Europe, but Elisabet Ney, unwilling, perhaps, to lose the breath of freedom so necessary to the well-being



STUDIO OF ELISABET NEY AT FUNCHAL, MADEIRA.

of an independent spirit, preferred the atmosphere of the United States, and, attracted by the descriptions of the Texas climate, she went to that state, and finally settled on the beautiful Liendo plantation near Hempstead. There for several years she lived in complete retirement, interested above all other things in absorbing a knowledge of the people, manners and institutions of a world new to her. Naturally, out of this contemplation came at length the conviction that one of the greatest needs of that state is the cultivation of the public taste, and industrial education guided by the influence of art. While she was pondering on the matter, Governor Roberts, then governor of Texas, called her from her retirement to visit him at the mansion to consult about plans for the state capitol, which was then about to be erected. One of the results of her visit was that she decided to establish herself in Austin, and very shortly afterward she built her studio in Hyde Park, and immediately began the





STUDIO AT HYDE PARK, AUSTIN.

work of interesting such congenial minds as she could find among the Austin men and women in a project for establishing a school of liberal arts in conjunction with the state university. The plan commended itself to many leading citizens, and received their hearty support. The proposed academy would offer instruction in the decorative and domestic arts, as well as in the higher arts, and includes the leading features of the Pratt Institute of Brooklyn and the Drexel Institute of Philadelphia. But the work of interesting the public mind has naturally been slow, and, in the meantime, she has employed herself in the production of works which are of great interest and value to Texas.

The most notable work of this Austin studio was a lifesize, full-length statue of Stephen F. Austin. It is a wonderful realization of the historic idea of Austin, and at the same time an exquisitely lofty expression of the ideal type of the American pioneer. The figure is garbed in a buckskin hunting suit, and stands in a graceful attitude of rest, with gun resting in the hollow of one arm, while the hands hold a partially unrolled map of the colony. The treatment is very simple, yet the work powerfully expresses the complex spirit which actually animated Austin, who had not only the fearless hardihood of the men who made themselves the advance guard along the western moving line of American civilization, but also the intellectual force of the state builder, and the fine wisdom of the diplomat. Physical and mental gifts of a singular order united to produce in him the rarest type of the American pioneer—the type that will attract the poet of the future. No other type, perhaps no other man, could have made a success of that first attempt to naturalize what, for want of a more specific name, must be called the “American” idea on Mexican soil. In theory, it would seem that no artist but one nurtured from the cradle on the principles and traditions that make us what we are, could have so unerringly realized that American idea. The fact that Elisabet Ney has done so in this statue of Austin is but another proof that, after all, genius does possess some mysterious divining rod by which it discovers the very remotest depths of human nature, and thence draws the secret that makes the variation of the type, whatever it may happen to be. One would say that even the ancestors of this artist must have been Texans to have enabled her so perfectly to realize in this imperishable work the true idea of the First Texan. The likeness was secured from portraits loaned by Hon. Guy M. Bryan, and is thought to be very good; but while studying the work one feels impelled to say: “I do not ask, I do not care, whether this is how



STATUE OF STEPHEN F. AUSTIN.



STATUE OF SAM HOUSTON.



Austin looked ; I only know that this is how he should have looked, for this is the perfect realization of my idea of the Austin whom history portrays."

The artist's now famous statue of Houston, which, it will be remembered, was exhibited at the Columbian Exposition, was made at about the same period as the Austin statue. The praise which the critics there gave it proves that it ranks with the artist's best works. The committee in charge of the Art Building at the Exposition made repeated efforts to induce Mrs. Tobin to permit the transfer of the statue from the Texas Building to the Art Building, and offered to give it a place of honor there, but Mrs. Tobin refused, fearing that if the statue was disassociated from the Texas exhibit our state might lose some of the credit of having sent a work of such commanding merit to the exposition.

Besides these two full length statues, Elisabet Ney has executed busts of several noted Texans of to-day, among others those of Ex-senator Reagan, Ex-governors Lubbock and Roberts, and General Hardeman, Governor Ross and Governor Sayers, also a monument of General Albert Sidney Johnston. All of these have great artistic value, and, as time passes, will gain an increasing historic one. Truly, the old world's loss in being fated to part with this great sculptor was the immeasurable gain of Texas.

For many years she declared that she was totally devoid of the feeling called patriotism, meaning that the whole world was her country, all mankind her countrymen, and that she refused to confine her love to a special country or people ; but a letter she wrote to a Texas friend in August, 1896, while approaching Galveston on her return from her year-long visit in Germany, proves that she had mistaken herself. The letter was written on board the ship *Texas*, on the Gulf of Mexico, at daybreak, and in describing the beauty of the dawn, and the effect upon herself after her long absence, she wrote :

"It is a true joy of feeling which is mine as I awake—of expansion—such as I think I never felt before, or at least not since years. And though I truly am void of what we would call patriotism (I had this to avow over and over again in Europe), the appellation Texas has a charm for me, a charm of the peculiar kind, in nearing it, such as no other part of the wide earth has ; as if it constitutes the nucleus containing all in all that gives charm to life for me."